

October 6, 1964

Dr. Irvine H. Page
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Dear Dr. Page:

The proposal accompanying your letter of September 30 had a very familiar ring to it, and after some searching around in my files I found that I had submitted an almost identical proposal, stemming from similar motivations, to the task force that was chaired by Wilbur Cohen at the inception of the Kennedy administration. To my best recollection, the proposal for a National Academy of Medicine, or as I would have preferred to call it, a National Academy of Health, either did not appear, or certainly did not appear prominently among the recommendations of the task force as they were finally submitted to Mr. Kennedy. However, I think it quite possible that Dr. Cohen could still have some shrewd observations on the subject. In retrospect, I am very much less certain about the desirability of moving such an organization than I was four years ago. There would probably be considerable merit and no obvious grave difficulties if such an organization were confined to academic medicine; but the competition for this kind of prestige that is likely to be accentuated if it becomes available to specialists in non-academic practice may make the task of selecting worthy candidates intolerably difficult. Furthermore, my experience with the National Academy of Sciences does not support any conviction on my part that it is a particularly effective mechanism for dealing with the kinds of concerns that we share about the future of medicine in this country, as I do not believe it is doing an especially good job with respect to science.

The basic issue, I suppose, is that one would like to give some dignity and voice to the wisest and, in general, least committed segments of the intellectual community. In the academic world there may have been some correspondence between these qualifications and scholarly eminence and reputation which figure in the choice of nominees. I am not sure that this would necessarily be generally true in medicine. It is perhaps a principle that is already becoming eroded in the scientific world, *mutatis mutandis* with the growing social impact of scientific developments.

I would be delighted if there were some relatively innocuous means by which outstanding socially useful talent and performance in medicine could be recognized, particularly in fields where this is not now already done by monetary rewards and community standing. Perhaps the best compromise to answer this possibility would be a slight broadening of the existing framework of the National Academy of Sciences to allow some more flexibility in the recognition

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of scientific talent in fields which are not now adequately represented. The real possibility that a National Academy of Health might in fact come to be dominated by the most reactionary elements now represented by the AMA frightens me the most, and I see no way of predicting what the actual evolution of such a body might be. Since under more favorable auspices the performance of the National Academy of Sciences has been relatively marginal, I would conclude that my present inclinations would be conservative until I could see very much more clearly how criteria of excellence could be applied in a way that would be relevant to the socially constructive purposes of such an academy.

I certainly do agree with you how unbalanced the representation of medical science and practice is among the high councils of government in relation to the enormity of political problems that are being engendered now by the progress of medical science. This probably has something to do with the very touchy political status of issues like Medicare and the hypersensitivity that an articulate part of the medical community has shown to any progress that might be distorted into or confused with socialized medicine. While the debate over this set of issues is probably the most grievous motivation for a national academy, I really doubt that a useful organization can be built until the fundamental issues have been resolved at a political level.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics